

# A REVIEW OF IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOR: DEFINITION & AFFECTING FACTORS

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## Abstract

The present article reviews the literature available in the field of impulse buying. The review specifically focuses on understanding “impulse buying” and the factors that contribute majorly towards this behavior. The review article starts with various definitions of impulse buying behavior and after delving thoroughly into the concept, the article then moves into present a review of factors that are found to have an influence over impulse buying behavior by various researchers. The factors have been presented in 2 parts- intrinsic and extrinsic and discussed in detail under each part. At the end a summary of both the factors is given.

*Keywords* -impulse, impulse buying, unplanned purchases, factors, hedonic complex phenomenon

**Design/Methodology/approach:** the article has used extant literature available in the area of impulse buying and an attempt has been made to present the current level of knowledge in an integrated form. Academic papers, research papers and articles from year 1950-2018 are used for this purpose, the academic works and research papers were selected on the basis of relevance to the current field of interest.

## Introduction

Impulse buying remained an enigma in the field of marketing for a long period of time. Impulse buying is stated as the dark side of consumer behavior in the literature. Among various traits and factors which influence the buying behavior of consumer, Impulse is one such factor and plays a major role in consumer buying behavior. Impulsive buying as explained by researchers is an unplanned purchase which is based upon irrational thinking. And since the very beginning, impulse buying behavior is a topic of great interest. Researchers and practitioners are interested in the field of impulse buying for the past sixty years.

## Impulse Buying- Definitional Standpoints

### Impulse buying as a synonym of unplanned purchases

Impulse buying in the initial studies was understood as a phenomenon which is similar and synonymous to unplanned purchases (Clover, 1950; West, 1951).

### Impulse buying due to exposure to stimulus

Applebaum was first to identify and include role of stimulus in defining impulse buying. According to Applebaum, impulse buying- “buying which presumably was not planned by the customer before entering a store, but which resulted from a stimulus created by a sales promotional device in the store” (Applebaum, 1951). Later, Stern attempted to refine the definition of impulse buying, classified the term into 4 types- Pure impulse buying, Reminder impulse buying, Suggestion impulse buying and Planned impulse buying (Stern, 1962). In all the 4 types of classifications put forward by Stern, the common point was “exposure to stimulus” as expressed by the words “sees product/item” (Stern, 1962). Thus Applebaum and Stern’s definition of impulse buying were major improvements over the previous viewpoints which held impulse buying as just a synonym to unplanned purchases. The fact that impulse buying is a combination of unplanned purchases and exposure to stimulus was presented thereafter in various studies (Rook & Hoch, 1985).

### Impulse buying as a hedonic complex phenomenon

Researchers with time understood that impulsive buying behavior contains hedonic and psychological components. Buying decisions based on impulse has been defined as having, Affective (high activation of consumer), Cognitive (little intellectual control over buying) and Reactive elements (automatic behavior stimulated by special situation) in them (Weinberg & Gottwald, 1982).

Rook and Hoch identified five crucial elements that distinguish impulsive from non-impulsive consumer behavior- Sudden and spontaneous desire to act, a state of psychological disequilibrium, the onset of psychological conflict and struggle, a reduction in cognitive evaluation, lack of regard for the consequences of impulse buying (Rook & Hoch, 1985). Rook defined impulse buying as – “Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences” (Rook, 1987). The role of emotions in making impulse purchases was identified in previous studies too (Stern, 1962). Piron also recognised the role of seeking experience and disregarded emotional/cognitive reactions as determinant of impulse buying (Piron, 1991) and thus called impulse purchases as experiential and non-experiential.

### Impulse buying as different from unplanned purchase

Weinberg in his work distinguished impulse buying from unplanned purchases by saying that- “impulsive buying decisions are “unplanned” in the sense of “thoughtless,” but not all unplanned purchases are impulsively decided. Unplanned purchases may be made absolutely rationally”(Weinberg & Gottwald, 1982). Rook, along with focusing on the hedonic component, distinguished impulse buying from unplanned purchases and explained that impulse buying is a narrower concept as compared to unplanned purchases and that “Not all unplanned purchases are impulsively decided”(Rook, 1987).

Hence, the definition of impulse buying got improved and gained various dimensions with time.

### Factors motivating Impulse Buying

According to Stern “Impulse buying is influenced by a variety of economic, personality, time, location, and even cultural factors. These vary not only among different shoppers considering purchase of the same item, but also for the same shopper buying the same item but under different buying situations”(Stern, 1962). Thus Stern clearly indicated that impulse buying is affected by various internal as well as external factors. Rook in his study suggested that the researchers should investigate into situational factors that are involved in causing impulse buying(Rook, 1987)

Impulse buying, a hedonically complex phenomenon causing psychological and emotional conflict(Rook, 1987; Rook & Hoch, 1985) therefore calls for a detailed exploration of various factors that motivate this buying behavior. Thus, the following part of the review is about such motivators of impulse buying.

On the basis of available literature, the factors which motivate impulse buying can be classified into two types- internal motivators and external motivators. In this review, terms Intrinsic factors and Extrinsic factors are used which imply internal motivators and external motivators respectively.

#### Intrinsic Factors

Intrinsic factors refer to those factors which internally stimulate the urge in a person to buy impulsively. In context of impulse buying, various researchers found impulse buying being stimulated by a number of factors like-mood, affect, presence of a trait called “impulsivity”, emotions, shopping enjoyment, etc. All these factors are put together and are called “*Intrinsic factors affecting Impulse Buying*” in this review paper as they are a result of some internal thought process of a person which further induce him to make purchases impulsively.

In the beginning, majority of the studies about impulse buying was focused on defining and understanding the term. Later, the focus shifted to delving deep into the concept and to look for factors that cause impulsive buying.

“The buying impulse does not always depend on direct visual stimulation. Some respondents described sitting at home and suddenly experiencing the urge to go out and buy something, with no apparent external visual encouragement”(Rook, 1987). Stern in his study mentioned that “Impulse buying is influenced by a variety of economic, personality, time, location, and even cultural factors. These vary not only among different shoppers considering purchase of the same item, but also for the same shopper buying the same item but under different buying situations.(Stern, 1962)” and on the basis of this, he gave “impulse buying mix” which was about 4 broad classifications of impulse buying. Stern, also put forward various factors that affect impulse buying which were majorly extrinsic in nature. However, Stern hinted about role of *emotions* in making impulse buying while distinguishing pure impulse buying from suggestion impulse buying which were part of 4 classifications of impulse buying given by him. He said-“The distinction between suggestion buying and pure impulse buying is that items purchased on suggestion impulse can also be entirely rational or functional purchases, as opposed to the emotional appeal which sparks pure impulse purchases”(Stern, 1962) In a study conducted by Peter Weinberg and Wolfgang Gottwald, to empirically identify the emotions that cause impulse buying, comparing buyers and non-buyers, it was found that “Impulse buyers assess themselves as being more emotionalized than non-buyers. And that Impulse buyers differ significantly in their mimical expressions from non-buyers”(Weinberg & Gottwald, 1982). Rook in his study which was primarily about interpreting impulse buying in a new way clearly stated that impulse purchases are not rational but emotional and that impulse purchases can induce emotional conflict too(Rook, 1987). Piron however disregarded emotional or cognitive reactions as determinant characteristic of impulse buying and clarified that even when emotions are not felt during a purchase still impulse buying happens and called them as Experiential and non-experiential impulse buying(Piron, 1991).

Several studies were then conducted to identify if presence of some special trait differs the impulse buyers from non-buyers. The trait was called as “Impulsivity” or “*buying impulsiveness*”(Rook & Fisher, 1995) in various studies. Rook in his study suggested that consumer impulsivity should be considered as a lifestyle trait and that people vary in their impulse buying proclivities(Rook, 1987).. Considering the fact that the trait of impulsiveness has been studied by developmental psychologists, educational researchers etc. over number of years and that many customers consider themselves as impulsive buyer, Dennis W. Rook and Robert J. Fisher understanding that the tendencies of consumers to impulse buy can be conceptualized labeled the trait as “Buying Impulsiveness”(Rook & Fisher, 1995). They defined buying impulsiveness as a trait owing to which a consumer buys spontaneously, unreflectively, immediately and kinetically and that high impulsive buyers have all these tendencies while making purchases(Rook & Fisher, 1995). Beatty and Ferrell took – shopping enjoyment and impulse buying tendency (IBT) as Exogenous Individual Difference Variables and studied their influence on impulse purchasing. And concluded that IBT does not directly influence the impulse purchase but influences the urge to buy impulsively(Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). Youn and Faber, while trying to understand the relation of personality traits and cues with impulse buying, used the personality trait of “Lack of Control” as defined by Tellegen (cited as Tellegen, 1982) to study impulsivity and explained that a lack of control or impulsivity contribute to

impulsive buying behaviors (Youn & Faber, 2000). Badgaiyan and Verma in their study also reported a positive relationship between impulsive buying tendency and impulsive buying behaviour (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014). Thus Impulsive buying tendency (or impulsivity as a trait) has been several times proved as contributor to impulsive buying behavior. Badgaiyan and Verma not only studied the impact of impulse buying tendency on impulse buying behavior but also examined the effect of 4 other intrinsic factors namely, shopping enjoyment, materialism, culture and personality on impulsive buying behavior. They took the big 5 personality traits (emotional stability, agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness) and studied their impact on impulsive buying behavior. A significant positive effect of the big five personality traits on impulsive buying behavior was hypothesized and it was found to be partially supported by the research. The personality trait of extraversion was found to be positively related while conscientiousness as negatively related to impulse buying behavior. The impact of other three traits on impulsive buying behavior was not found as significant in their studies (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014). The attempts to study the impact of personality (or, personality traits) on impulsive buying behavior were made in previous studies too. Youn and Faber in the year 2000, taking reference from 11 personality traits identified by Tellegen (cited as Tellegen, 1982), took 3 personality traits- *Lack of control (or Impulsivity)*, *Stress Reaction and Absorption*, examined their impact on impulse buying behavior and found the personality trait of Lack of Control as highly correlated with impulse buying behavior while the other two traits were found to be moderately correlated with such behavior (Youn & Faber, 2000). It has been stated that a materialistic person attaches more value to object and focuses majorly on possession as he finds meaning, identity as well as happiness from more and more accumulations. Thus, *materialism* has been studied extensively in understanding consumer behavior. Taking this one step further, Badgaiyan and Verma tried to show to impact of materialism on impulse buying behavior and found that materialism is positively related to impulse buying behavior and directed that this could be a great opportunity for the marketers if they can make use of this factor to attract materialistic customers to make impulse purchases (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014).

Various studies also suggested that if a person enjoys shopping then there are more chances of impulse purchase as *Shopping Enjoyment Tendency* has a positive impact on impulse buying behavior (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014).

While discussing majorly about the impact of intrinsic factors on impulse buying behavior, Badgaiyan and Verma also concluded that intrinsic factors affect the impulsive buying behavior of a person in a same way irrespective of gender (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014) that is, men and women get affected by intrinsic factors in a similar way when taking about impulse buying behavior. Taking about *gender influence* on impulsive buying behavior, a study conducted to assess the difference in choice of products that were purchased on impulse by men and women revealed that men and women differ in their choices of products purchased impulsively and specified that men choose and prefer more functional and leisure-oriented products impulsively, while women choose products which are related to more appearance and body-related concerns (Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1995). Some other set of studies reported the similar findings that women purchase more beauty and health related items on impulse and backed it with the fact that women are more emotion and image-guided. The same study also revealed that women are more impulsive (affectively and cognitively) as compared to men (Coley & Burgess, 2003). In regard to choosing those products which appeal to self-identity, it was found that the consumers respond positively to promotional schemes and products which appeal and relate to their *self-identity* and indulge in impulsively buying them (Dittmar et al., 1995).

Studying impulse buying behavior in two different dimensions as affective impulse buying and cognitive impulse buying, a research conducted to examine the predictors of impulse buying, considering both above mentioned dimensions, it was found that satisfaction with life (*subjective well-being*) negatively impacts the cognitive impulse buying tendency while self-liking and self-competence (measures of *self-esteem*) negatively impacts the affective impulse buying tendency (Silvera, Lavack, & Kropp, 2008).

Another factor that impacts impulse buying behavior is found to be *mood and affect* (Silvera et al., 2008; Youn & Faber, 2000). Also, it was found and reported that impulsive purchases motivated by positive mood states, extend the same mood further. Impulsive buying along with mood extension can also cause mood alteration, some people shop while feeling negative, hoping that it will uplift their mood. Thus those who shop impulsively when in a negative mood tend to believe impulse buying as therapeutic, mood alteration tactic. Rook further in his study explained that if the negative affect is very much extreme then people may not indulge themselves in shopping at all. Comparing impulsive and non-impulsive buyers, it was found that while the positive mood affects the both type of buyers to make purchases impulsively, negative mood states like misery, depression are more likely to induce the impulsive buyers to make purchases even more impulsively (Rook & Gardner, 1993).

The intrinsic factors discussed above, that impact and influence the impulsive buying behavior are summarised in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Intrinsic Factors affecting Impulse Buying

Factors	Given by
<i>Mood</i> (positive and negative affect)	(Rook & Gardner, 1993) (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998) (Youn & Faber, 2000) (Silvera et al., 2008)
<i>Impulsivity as a lifestyle trait</i> ( Impulse buying tendency)	(Rook, 1987) (Rook & Fisher, 1995) (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998) (Youn & Faber, 2000) (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014)
<i>Emotions</i>	(Stern, 1962)

	(Weinberg & Gottwald, 1982) (Rook, 1987) (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991)
<i>Seeking experience</i>	(Piron, 1991)
<i>Shopping enjoyment</i>	(Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014)
<i>Gender (and Self-identity)</i>	(Dittmar et al., 1995) (Coley & Burgess, 2003)
<i>Personality</i>	(Youn & Faber, 2000) (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014)
<i>Subjective wellbeing</i> <i>Self esteem</i>	(Silvera et al., 2008)
<i>Materialism</i>	(Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014)

## Extrinsic Factors

Extrinsic factors refer to those factors which are present externally or are a part of some external environment. In the context of impulse buying, these are the factors that arise from a shopping set-up and affect the impulsive buying behavior. Various studies conducted to study the factors affecting impulse buying, a number of factors like- Culture, Store environment, Level of in-store browsing etc. were found to have significant impact on impulsive buying behavior. All these factors are put together and are called "*Extrinsic factors affecting Impulse Buying*" in this review paper.

The affect induced by shopping environment positively impacts impulse buying (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008). "The sudden urge to buy is likely to be triggered by a visual confrontation with a product or by some promotional stimulus" (Rook, 1987). The store environments were studied and explored in detail by various researchers to understand the impact they have on impulsive buying behavior. And time over time, it was strongly established that if the stores provide pleasurable or over-stimulating *store environments* and the customers experience them, then they spend some extra time in the store and make more unplanned and impulse purchases (Donovan & Rossiter, 1994; Mattila & Wirtz, 2008). The study that studied that impacts of store environment included impacts of employee friendliness and perceived crowding as positively impacting impulse buying behavior (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008). However, these were included in the *social factors* affecting the impulse buying behavior.

Along with social factors, the impact of *social influence* was also assessed, social influence means how much a consumer is susceptible to inter-personal influences, that is how the interpersonal influences affect the behavior of a consumer. The social influence was studied in 2 components- normative and informational and then the affects were observed, it was found that while normative influences positively lead to impulse purchases, the relation between informational influences and impulse buying was found as negative (Silvera et al., 2008). Physical proximity is often considered as a major factor that can contribute to impulse buying as many studies revealed respondents saying- "I see, I want" sort of statements thus linking this factor of physical proximity with in-store browsing, researchers proved that as people engage themselves more in in-store browsing, they come across various other products which may be desired subconsciously by them or which may appeal to them instantly upon sight, and they may feel the urge to possess such product and may end up purchasing them impulsively (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). It can be noted that level of in-store browsing throws light on two other factors- self-service and prominent store display which were identified by Stern in his studies (Stern, 1962). Stern identified nine factors which exert significant influence on impulse buying, such factors are- *Ease of shopping, Marginal Need for Item, Mass Distribution, Self-Service, Mass Advertising, Prominent store display, Short Product Life, Small Size or Light Weight, Ease of Storage*. Stern along with specifying the above mentioned factors that majorly influence the impulse buying, also identified the relevance of situational factors in inducing an impulse purchase (Stern, 1962). The impact of situational factors was again studied and Beatty and Ferrell while studying the impact of "affect" on impulse buying behavior realised that affect is an interplay of various individual and situational variables and thus situational variables can be seen as the variables that impact the impulse buying behavior, even though impulsive buying behavior cannot be linked to "one specific buying situation" (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). Two situational variables - *time availability and money available* were studied and reported as having significant positive relation with impulse buying tendency. Another study took 3 situational variables- *Time availability, Money availability, Task definition* and examined their moderating impact on impulsive buying behavior. The results revealed that while money availability and task definition are moderating factors, time availability is not a moderating factor and thus does not impact impulsive buying behavior (Chang, Yan, & Eckman, 2014).

Apart from all the factors mentioned above, one important factor whose impact on impulse buying behavior majorly interested the researcher in recent times is- *Culture*. One study, attempted to understand this interestingly studied culture in two parts as- Individualist and Collectivist. The study's results showed that "culture affects the relationship between trait buying impulsiveness and impulsive buying behavior" (Kacen, 2002). The results of the study were consistent with that of previous ones conducted in similar domain so it was concluded that "Although collectivists possess the buying impulsiveness trait in equal measure with individualists, they suppress this trait impulse and act in a manner that is consistent with cultural norms which reduces their impulsive buying behavior" (Kacen, 2002). Thus individualists are seen as more impulsive buyers as compared to collectivists. However a study conducted by Badgaiyan and Verma reported results in sharp contrast saying that collectivists are also impulsive buyers and backed it by saying that it could be due to change in the purchasing habits of the eastern societies (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014). Another study, took 5 different dimensions of culture as defined by Hofstede (cited as Hofstede, 2011)- Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Collectivism, Masculinity, Long-term orientation, and then the impacts were examined separately on

affective and cognitive impulse buying tendency. The cultural dimensions of Long term orientation and Uncertainty Avoidance were found to be negatively related with cognitive

*Impulse buying tendency while the dimensions*-Power Distance, Masculinity and Long term orientation significantly influence the affective impulsive buying tendency(Ali & Sudan, 2018).

The Extrinsic factors that impact and influence the impulsive buying behavior are summarised in the table 2 below.

Table 2: Summary of Extrinsic Factors affecting Impulse Buying

Factors	Given by
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ease of shopping</i></li> <li>• <i>Marginal Need for Item</i></li> <li>• <i>Mass Distribution</i></li> <li>• <i>Self-Service</i></li> <li>• <i>Mass Advertising</i></li> <li>• <i>Prominent store display</i></li> <li>• <i>Short Product Life</i></li> <li>• <i>Small Size or Light Weight</i></li> <li>• <i>Ease of Storage</i></li> </ul>	(Stern, 1962)
<i>Culture</i>	(Kacen, 2002) (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2014) (Ali & Sudan, 2018)
<i>Store environment</i>	(Rook & Hoch, 1985) (Rook, 1987) (Donovan & Rossiter, 1994) (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008)
<i>Level of in-store browsing</i>	(Beatty & Ferrell, 1998)
<i>Situational factors</i> ( <i>Time available, Money available</i> )	(Stern, 1962) (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998) (Chang et al., 2014)
<i>Social factors</i>	(Mattila & Wirtz, 2008)
<i>Social influence</i>	(Silvera et al., 2008)

**Summary**

The article, in the beginning sections reviewed the various definitions and understandings of the phenomenon of impulse buying presented over time and how the concept of impulse buying has evolved over years from being called synonymous to unplanned purchases to being understood as different from it, and then the dimensions of hedonic complexity getting added to it. The paper then looks into various factors that motivate the impulse buying behavior as found by various researchers The factors, for the ease of understanding have been divided and presented into two parts- intrinsic and extrinsic and thereafter reviewed in detail. The next table presents the reviewed intrinsic and extrinsic factors together-

Table 3: intrinsic & Extrinsic factors affecting impulse buying behavior

Intrinsic factors	Extrinsic factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mood &amp; affect</i></li> <li>• <i>Impulse buying tendency</i></li> <li>• <i>Emotions</i></li> <li>• <i>Experience seeking</i></li> <li>• <i>Shopping enjoyment</i></li> <li>• <i>Gender</i></li> <li>• <i>Personality</i></li> <li>• <i>Subjective wellbeing &amp; Self esteem</i></li> <li>• <i>Materialism</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ease of shopping</i></li> <li>• <i>Marginal Need for Item</i></li> <li>• <i>Mass Distribution</i></li> <li>• <i>Self-Service</i></li> <li>• <i>Mass Advertising</i></li> <li>• <i>Prominent store display</i></li> <li>• <i>Short Product Life</i></li> <li>• <i>Small Size or Light Weight</i></li> <li>• <i>Ease of Storage</i></li> <li>• <i>Culture</i></li> <li>• <i>Store environment</i></li> <li>• <i>In-store browsing</i></li> <li>• <i>Situational factors</i></li> <li>• <i>Social factors and Social influence</i></li> </ul>

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